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A Security Breach at the Arms Control Agency?

A security dispute that has bubbled within the Reagan administration for nearly two years neared the surface May 7 when Deputy Defense Secretary William H. Taft IV wrote to Kenneth L. Adelman, director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency.

Taft crossed out "Dear Mr. Adelman" in the salutation and wrote in "Ken," but there all camaraderie ended. Citing "disturbing reports" on ACDA's handling of classified material, he noted that its continued reception of intelligence from the Pentagon is "predicated" on obeying "strict security standards."

The point at issue is Adelman's refusal to fire an ACDA employee accused of mishandling top-secret intelligence documents. That has caused not only the Pentagon-ACDA rift, but evoked an aura of mystery about what the U.S. government is doing in the shadowy regions of nuclear proliferation. It also has energized right-wing discontent with Adelman, a neo-conservative and hard-line spokesman on arms control policy who was confirmed by the Senate in 1983 only after bitter opposition from liberals.

The right grumbles that Adelman failed to clean house at ACDA, retaining the likes of arms control stalwart Thomas Graham as general counsel. Graham was author of a memorandum whose leaking this year turned the tide against early deployment of the Strategic Defense Initiative.

Graham also is a key player in events triggered in July 1985 when a "codeword" document—containing communications intelligence information from the Pentagon's National Security Agency—was found on the desk of an ACDA employee, Kathleen Strang. An "audit" was made of her safe, which was found to contain 450 pages of codeword material that should have been in the agency vault.

The thorough investigation by Berne Indahl, ACDA security officer, ran into heat from Graham and other key officials at the agency and defense of Strang from Arthur Hartman, then ambassador to the Soviet Union and since a center of the Moscow embassy security scandal. Based on Indahl's report and the recommendation by an outside panel, ACDA administrative officer William Montgomery recommended that Strang be stripped of her clearance and fired.

Adelman overruled that recommendation, instead suspending Strang for six months without pay after which she could return to ACDA with top-secret, but not codeword, clearance. "There is no evidence of any compromise of material," Adelman told us, contending she had a previous record of "12 years with no security violation."

Lt. Gen. William E. Odom, NSA director, has threatened to cut off ACDA from his agency's communications intelligence. Rep. Robert Dornan, a hot-tempered conservative Republican, has tangled with what he has described to friends as "unbelievable arrogance" by the wise-cracking Adelman.

Dornan's complaints were cited in Taft's remarkable letter to Adelman last week. Taft disagreed with Adelman's position, represented by Graham in an internal document as striking "an appropriate balance" between protecting national security information and "the basic fairness to the employee."

The Pentagon deputy argued "that we should err on the side of caution" when it comes to safeguarding "our intelligence sources." As for Strang's clearance, Taft said: "Employees whose past conduct renders questionable their ability or willingness to adhere rigorously to security controls should not retain eligibility for secret or top secret clearance." He specifically asked "what actions" Adelman contemplates as a result of a CIA review of ACDA security procedure.

If the Pentagon considers this matter serious enough to hint at depriving ACDA of intelligence, why is ACDA so adamant on this point? Adelman thinks it is the case of the Moscow-spawned security hysteria infecting his right-wing critics.

Less than four years ago, Adelman was the toast of the conservative movement—winning an uphill battle for Senate confirmation. Today, he not only is assailed by the right but is admonished by the Pentagon to clean up his act. That symbolizes the descent of Republicans in the Reagan administration's last days.

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